

# How to talk to your children about 9/11

A resource from [ColumbiaMissourian.com](http://ColumbiaMissourian.com)

## Who we talked to

— **Jessie Bradley**, director of MU's Child Development Lab, has been working with children for more than 30 years. Her experience includes child development in refugee camps helping young children express and sort through emotional trauma.

— **Amanda Rock**, a columnist and blogger who writes About.com's guide to preschoolers. She shared her expertise in an About.com article, and expanded on them with us in a phone interview.

— **Norbert Richardson**, MU assistant professor of clinical surgery, has five children who were ages 4, 6, 8, 9 and 21 during the tragedy.

— **Jim Flink**, vice president of news operations at Newsy, has two children who are now ages 7 and 10. He is dealing with teaching his kids about 9/11 after all these years.

On the 10th anniversary of 9/11, many news sources will be showing pictures, re-airing footage and recounting the testimonies of survivors, witnesses and volunteers. For adults, this will be a day of remembrance. But it will also be the first time many children will be hearing and seeing the events in detail. The Missourian asked two people who work or write about child development and two Columbia parents to share their advice on how to introduce this topic to young children. **Here is their advice:**

### 1. Be there when they're watching.

According to Bradley, one of the most important things a parent can do is simply be there if and when their children are watching the news. By simply supervising, parents can gauge reaction, answer questions and facilitate conversation. She also said to encourage questions, clarify misunderstandings and, most importantly, reassure them. "Kids look to their parents to keep them safe," Bradley said. "At a young age, they may have a hard time understanding that the pictures and footage have already happened. By being there, you can assure them that they are safe now. It's all about reassurance."

Flink said that although his kids have seen some coverage, at 7 and 10 they are still very young to be seeing everything. He does feel it's necessary to limit some of the exposure they get. Something he thinks is important, though, is for his children to hear about his personal experience. "I explained where I was when it happened and what I felt — first fear, then depression, then a determination to regain perspective. And I explained what I learned — that evil exists in the minds of people who begin with small fringe beliefs and become obsessed by them."

## 2. Facts are good, but keep it general.

If your child has questions about the footage they are seeing, have the facts so you're able to answer honestly. However, depending on the age, parents should be careful about what details they include. Bradley advised staying general and keeping the scope as global as possible.

Richardson said the facts were important and the main question his kids were asking was, "How could someone do this to other people?" Richardson and his wife told the kids, "The attack was by radical Muslims, but there are millions and millions of Muslims who aren't bad. There is just a small faction who misunderstood — doing bad things thinking they are doing the right things. They were raised to believe their god wanted that from them, so the blame isn't necessarily all theirs."

## 3. Consider your child's perspective.

Rock suggests keeping it as simple as possible and never forgetting your child's point of view. She said young children tie everything into how it relates to them. According to her, young children pick up on anger and fear and might become alarmed if their parents become too emotional. The risk is that children will pick up on feelings of sadness and anger and apply it to themselves.

Richardson was in the military, and he said his kids were even more distressed than most, thinking that at any moment their father could be deployed. He told his kids, "Everything is going to be OK. You can see it on the TV, but it really is far away." He knew that there was a possibility that he could be called away, though, so reassurance was most important for him as a father.

## 4. Look for signs of distress.

Depending on the child's personality, distress can be shown in a variety of ways — some more obvious than others. Younger children can express anxiety through

tantrums, while older children can obsess over details. Bradley suggests keeping an eye on your children's reactions and not being afraid to discuss their feelings. "If they are getting upset, talk it out or simply limit the viewings — that's why it's important to be there and monitor what they're watching," she said. "Ask them what they're thinking. Don't be afraid of the conversation."

## 5. Use it as a learning opportunity.

Bradley said the news coverage could be used as an educational opportunity for social issues, anger management and safety. Bring up the brave men and women who helped after and the patriotism the tragedy fostered. While this may seem like a lot for a young child to handle, Bradley said if you keep your wording general, you can facilitate a conversation with your child that helps them sort through the events while also providing good lessons in how to treat others.

"Instead of saying, 'There are al-Qaida terrorists who flew two planes into the Twin Towers and killed a bunch of people and all that,'" she said, "by simply saying 'There were bad people who were angry and wanted to hurt Americans,' you as a parent are able to talk about good ways to handle anger. Steer your answers into a discussion about accepting peoples' differences."

## 6. Encourage your children to come to you.

Rock said one of the most important things a parent can do during this emotional discussion is to make sure the child knows he or she can come to you with questions and to continue the discussion if they have concerns or additional questions. She said that children want to know they, and their family, will be unharmed and that reassuring that fear is among the most important things to keep in mind. Richardson said that he and his wife encouraged the kids to talk to them, "We told them it was OK to be afraid and sad for what had happened, and certainly they can talk to us, and they did, at least for a few days. Kids are resilient, and soon they were back into their own lives."